MAKE A JOYFUL NOISE
Psalm 100
November 23, 1980

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Frustration - is feeling deeply about something and being unable to express it; hearing an elegant Bach fugue on the car radio and having no one beside you to share it, or seeing a magnificent sunset, or bright moon, or starry night and having to be content with the solitary experience until we can tell someone about it, as in "You should have seen..." Half the joy of reading is to share an insight, a particularly well-written passage with someone else. Particular frustration, I have discovered, is to be a solitary spectator at an athletic contest in which one's child is not only participating but also excelling and having no one about to whom to declare - "that's my daughter or son." Love is incomplete until it is expressed. What Dante felt classically for Beatrice wasn't love at all because it was utterly at a distance, and altogether unfulfilled. How sterile to be at Ohio Stadium yesterday as a neutral observer and not to experience and participate in the feeling dimension of what transpired there. (In fact, it has been suggested that future archeologists, who uncover our civilization millenia hence, will deduce, quite logically, that we were a most religious people. How else to explain the mysterious rites that transpired in the great coliseum, the overwhelming crowds each time a ceremony was scheduled, the processional, the high priests in ceremonial garb, prophets, liturgical dance, disciples, hymns, responsive chants, offerings, sacramental communings, the total devotion of the faithful, the joyful ecstasy and deadly grief? Will they not conclude that in this place the most joyful noise made by anyone for any reason transpired six or seven Saturdays per year in the concrete temple by the Olentangy?)

A contemporary symbol of both the intense frustration when we cannot share feelings and the deeply human propensity to do so, is the young man, swaggering through a city crowd, his portable stereo slung over his shoulder, blaring...not only assaulting your privacy but perhaps desperately trying to induce anybody to share his feelings, which are often expressed only in the music he insists that you hear.

The Bible is a great advocate of expressing your feelings, especially about God, In fact, the Bible gets downright pushy about it. We are ordered to praise the Lord, to fall down before Him, to approach Him with gratitude, to wave palm branches and bang cymbals together for Him, to thank Him ceaselessly, in sum, to "make a joyful noise". There is no restraint in the Bible when it comes to telling God how one feels. To praise God, in the idiom of the Bible, is to get together with your neighbors and clap one another on the back. Praise is corporate. John Wesley once observed that, "There is no solitary religion in the Bible". The imperative to praise God is not an invitation for quiet introspection on the subject of providence. The Psalter, rather, pulls out all the stops - "Make a joyful noise..., all the lands!"

Much of the Bible seems to have been written by people who were overwhelmed by God, intoxicated by their sense of His goodness, hopelessly in love with Him, and committed to the necessity of expressing all of that - corporately and enthusiastically. There is no better example than the 100th Psalm. It was written for a liturgical procession moving toward the great Temple in Jerusalem to make a thank offering. From outside a choir of voices chanted:

"Make a joyful noise to the Lord, all the lands -
Serve the Lord with gladness."

From inside came a response -

"Know that the Lord is God.
It is he that hath made us."

The choir outside sang...

"Enter his gates with thanksgiving
and his courts with praise."

And before the gates were opened, the choir inside asserted...

"The Lord is good:
His steadfast love endures forever
and his faithfulness to all generations."

The first hymn in our hymnal is "Old Hundredth" set to a tune composed by Calvin's organist and favorite hymn-writer, Louis Bourgeois. We use his tune every time we sing "Praise God from whom all blessings flow" - the Doxology. The words to "Old Hundredth"... "all people that on earth do dwell" are a paraphrase of Psalm 100, phrase by phrase, written by William Kethe, a Scottish clergyman who was a friend of John Knox. The hymn is the oldest English hymn in use. It is one of our most precious treasures. Those hearty pilgrims on the coast of New England in 1621 certainly sang it.

Beyond the liturgical, ceremonial use of the Psalm, however, thoughtful people have sometimes wondered about its insistence on praising, thanking and worshiping God. In fact, thoughtful people have wondered why the God portrayed in the Bible is always ordering people to love Him and praise Him. If He's all He claims to be, they reason, why does He have to order people to worship Him? Isn't it a little like an immature, egocentric lover who needs constant reassurance that he or she is lovely, attractive and exciting? Isn't it, after all, a little like ordering one's own children to be grateful - or else? I discovered a delightful chapter in C.S.Lewis' little book on the Psalms in which he describ his early irritation with the Bible at just this point. "Worst of all," he wrote, "was the suggestion of the very silliest Pagan bargaining. More than once the Psalmist seems to be saying, 'You like praise. Do this for me and you shall have some.'" (Reflections on the Psalms, p. 77ff).

There is an adolescent egotism in all of us that does not like to be ordered to do anything: some of us dig our heels in , almost in anticipation of a command. The turning point for me was when I could acknowledge in maturity, that God doesn't need my act of worship - I do. Ecclesiastically the turning point is in seeing that the impulse to go to church, worship God, is not an external imperative imposed by an authority outside ourselves. We may go through the motions but we do not worship well, if at all, under those conditions. God doesn't need our worship any more than we need our children's gratitude. The need is all ours...to be fully human by placing our lives in the context of a creator's love and will and then giving expression to the feelings generated. C.S.Lewis said it much better than that. "God," he wrote, "is that object to admire which is simply to be awake.. not to appreciate which is to have lost the greatest experience, and in the end to have lost all. The incomplete and crippled lives of those who are tone-deaf, have never been in love, never known true firendship, never cared for a good book, never enjoyed the feel of the morning air on their cheeks, are faint images of it." (Ibid., p.79).

And so, upon reflection, the Bible seems to know what is best for us. In insisting that we praise, adore, and thank God, it is requiring us to do the very thing that makes us most human. Lewis wrote, "praise almost seems to be inner health made audible." (p.80). George Buttrick wrote somewhere, "...praise is native and men give thanks for the same reason that the birds sing." And Eric Routley, a salty British church musician, "Take away a man's capacity for praise and you have him well on the way to hell." (Hymns and the Faith, p.26).

The sorriest, saddest people I know are those who feel no gratitude, who have lost the capacity to be overwhelmed by the goodness or grace of anything that comes from outside oneself, people rendered incapable of making a joyful noise about anything.

And yet, even for those of us who are inclined in that direction, there is much about our situation which mitigates against making much joyful noise, particularly, for

the Lord. In fact, the noises coming from the portion of God's people in mainline Protestant churches seem rather more like a communal lament than a joyful psalter. Perhaps whatever crisis in which we find ourselves - and our national statistics do suggest that we are in one - is very simply that we have forgotten how to make the joyful noises the Bible enjoins. Perhaps our malady is quite simply an epidemic of institutional hand-wringing. In any case, the pall that hangs over the church indicates a crisis of faith which must be addressed. -- cult basic, elemental gratitude for being - Ps 100

Theologically, we are at the business end of a process which systematically seems to have squeezed God out of the picture. In the current issue of Theology Today, James Mosely bluntly observes, "Thinking about God is especially hard in our times." (10/80,p.315 Rationalism banished the supernatural God who works miracles from the classroom. Rationalism taught people to build reservoirs rather than praying for rain. Secularism banished the church from the established orders of society. But the issue is not whether an innocuous prayer is read over the PA system in school, or scripture is force fed to children of families who do not choose to hear it. Those are, I believe, diversionary issues. The critical problem is a culture and way of thinking that has made humanity divine, acted as if God is dead and decided that self-realization and self-gratification is the only paradis there is or ever will be. Marxism taught that religion is an opiate. We have reversed tha image in the mirror of our culture so that materialism is our narcotic. Neither way of thinking allows much space for God.

But a very interesting transition seems already to have begun. I was privileged this summer to sit in a seminar led by Herman Kahn, Director of the Hudson Institute. Kahn is a futurist of considerable reputation in government and business circles. Someone asked him what he believed - theologically. His response was classic. "At sixteen I was an atheist," he said. "At twenty-five I was an agnostic, at thirty-five a deist. The way I'm going I'll soon be a rabbi."

Herman Kahn's pilgrimage is a familiar and healthy one. Rationalism fooled us. We actually believed we knew all there was to know: that human intellect could comprehend all there was to comprehend. All it would take is time. But scientists aren't saying that anymore. In fact, scientists are the new advocate for humility, reverence, awe. The recent fly-by Saturn reminded any who needed reminding of the vastness and mystery and unknown in the universe.

Writing an essay for the Futurist publication, University of Michigan philosopher Henry Skolinoski, writing essentially for people who long ago rejected traditional religious language, proposes a renewal of what he terms "Reverential thinking". He writes, "To think reverentially is to recognize human life as an intrinsic value, it is to recognize love as an essential and indispensible modality of human existence...is to recognize joy as part of daily living." (Through the 80's, p.273). Or, as someone put it a while ago -

"Make a joyful noise to the Lord, all the lands -
For the Lord is good..."

A transition is in process. But the crisis of faith itself also includes a rather major problem we have with joy. The fact is, we descendents of Puritan religion still suspect frivolity whenever anyone laughs in church. As is usually the case the "ism" becomes an exaggeration of its original form. Calvin was no Calvinist, and Puritans might not recognize Puritanism. Nevertheless we are known more for out severity than our glee. Sternness and sobriety do characterize our worship. What goes for "joyful noise" in most of our churches are atrocious nineteenth century hymns about death and dying with full vibrato on the organ. A puritan divine once allowed as how "laughter was of the devil" and we often seem to believe he was right - when, for instance, we teach our children that reverence is expressed like sadness - and going to worship will always be the occasion

for coerced silence. Why not applaud or laugh or at least sing with a portion of the conviction we invest in football? Where is it written that the way we worship God must be, first of all, boring? Presbyterian Carl Dudley proposes that after the scripture we might, on occasion, replace the sedate "Thanks be to God" with a more meaningful "Fantastic!", And, as Jerry Beavers taught our children a few weeks ago, a more authentice response to prayer than "Amen" might be something like "Right on!" (A.D.Magazine, November 1980).

Our crisis of faith might begin to be resolved and, by the way, people might begin to pay attention to us - and our faith - again, if we recovered one of the oldest dynamics of our tradition - the profound joy which results from acknowledging that the Lord is God- that we are His people - and that His love endures forever. No crisis of faith will be resolved and no joyful noise will be made, however, which does not in some way respond to the dilemma of evil. Relentlessly we ask Job's question: "Why?" Across the centuries people has asked: "Why hunger, why injustice, why cancer, why war, why death,'Father, why have you forsaken me'?" The Biblical response is - very simply - "the Lord is good." It is not, please understand, that God wills and orchestrates human suffering or sickness or death or tragic accidents. It is that the freedom in which God creates human life allows evil things to happen, but, inspite of that, the Lord is good - His love endures forever.

That's the critical difference with Biblical faith. The Bible does not tie its theology to good fortune, good health, victory in battle. That's how it was for everyone else in history until a Hebrew prophet one time suggested that God loves and cares for His people precisely when things are not going well. The Jews gave the world the ability to see God even in suffering and sickness and defeat. The Jews gave the world one of their sons - whose death on a cross, we believe, is the demonstration of God's love; not the victo of evil and death, but a gesture of love.Gratitude sometimes seems more profound somehow in adversity. Joy somehow seems more authentic when it is experienced and expressed in the face of tragedy - just as the light of a candle takes on its essential character the minute it is surrounded by darkness. Thus this prayer, scribbled on a wall in the Warsaw Ghetto:

"I believe in the sun, even if it does not shine.
I believe in love, even if I do not feel it.
I believe in God, even if I do not see him."
(Hans Kung, Signposts for the Future, p.164).

Thus, the haunting line from Anne Frank's last Hannukah, "We have so much for which to be thankful. Let us praise God!" (See Carl Dudley, More Than Thanksgiving, A.D., November, 1980, p.48). Thus Lincoln, establishing the national holiday in the midst of a Civil War, and Washington, eight separate times, calling the early Americans to prayers of gratitude and, of course, back before it all - that pathetic little bank of Christians who had buried most of their friends, relatives, children, precariously perched on the edge of a new world, celebrating Thanksgiving. They knew what they were about. They knew the meaning of the English hymn they brought with them. All of them - all who have had faith big enough to feel gratitude, to express it, to share it in the midst of adversity - knew the meaning of the ancient words...

Make a joyful noise to the Lord, all the lands.
Know that the Lord is God.
Give thanks to him: bless his name.
For the Lord is good;
his steadfast love endures forever
and his faithfulness to all generations.

Amen.

Lord God of all, we would give expression to the gratitude that is in us. Hear our thanksgiving; our joyful noises; hear our tentative expressions; hear even the faith which is expressed in doubt and skepticism. For all You are, we give You thanks; through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.